

Validating Agencies' Perspectives: Keys to Successful Collaborations

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Abstract

Effective university-community collaborations can contribute directly to the welfare of children, youth, and families if the collaboration is mutually beneficial. As Tiamiyu (2000, 29) states, "little is, however, known about participants' views of university-community partnerships." By examining the agencies' perspectives in the process of forming new collaborations, the university sees the "problems" of such a venture through the eyes of others. This paper outlines the process of using small-group meeting results and survey results to determine the perceptions of human service agencies about the barriers to forming successful collaborations and about successful strategies to overcome those barriers.

Introduction

Effective university-community collaborations can contribute directly to the welfare of children, youth, and families (Groark and McCall 1996) if the collaboration is mutually beneficial; however, "much of the focus of collaboratives had to do with attempts at restructuring organizations and eventually the societies in which they find themselves," says Mattai (1998-99, 94). Fortunately, there has been an emergence of collaborative models that promote more reciprocal relationships between researchers and their subjects and promote new collaborations between research institutions and communities (Ansley and Gaventa 1997, 46).

In the spring of 2001, a diverse group of Penn State York faculty and staff investigated the possibility of establishing a university-community partnership with various human service agencies in the greater York area. The common denominator among the members of this group was their knowledge of and experience in university and community collaborations. After analyzing the research on successful university-community collaborations, the group discovered that there was a paucity of information about the perceptions of the agencies involved in those ventures.

Tiamiyu (2000, 29) states, "little is . . . known about participants' views of university-community partnerships." By examining the agencies' perspectives in the process of forming new collaborations, the university sees the "problems" of such a venture through the eyes of others. This empathetic stance encourages both partners to bridge institutional differences to meet their common goals. In order to establish strong relationships with human service agencies, the university must understand their needs, fears, and hopes. In doing so, common definitions of problems, solutions, and successes can be identified. The needs of both the university and the agencies are validated.

For numerous years, Penn State University has been involved in establishing a model of university-community collaboration while addressing children, youth, and family issues by linking individual campuses with the communities that they serve. One

primary vehicle for community outreach has been the Children, Youth, and Family Consortium. The CYFC was created to encourage and develop faculty expertise and to promote the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration that could place Penn State in a position of national and international leadership, demonstrating the role that a land-grant university could and should play in addressing critical social issues

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and serving community needs. The CYFC consortium has been the prototype for similar organizations across Penn State University campuses.

Relying on their previous experiences with CYFC, members of the Penn State York group set out to establish a partnership between the Penn State York Campus and human service agencies of the greater York community. The intent was to develop a mutually beneficial relationship that not only served the interests of the university, but also met the needs of the community. Cognizant of the image of "researchers from afar" held by some agency personnel, the Penn State York group members were committed to being hands-on partners with their community counterparts. While various Penn State York participants had pre-

viously established positive relationships with specific York agencies, this was the first time a coordinated effort was made to initiate a large-scale, long-term, multifaceted partnership. Based on informal feedback from individuals representing various agencies, the Penn State York group decided to begin their relationship building by focusing on the agencies' perceptions about university-community collaborations. What the Penn State York group learned was revealing. In addition to feeling that their voices were not heard, some agencies questioned the motives of university researchers.

This paper outlines the process that the Penn State York group used to include potential partners in the initial planning stages of the university and community partnership. It specifically highlights the use of small-group meeting results and survey results that identified the perceptions of human service agencies about the barriers to forming successful collaborations and about successful strategies to overcome those barriers.

Review of Literature

The need for collaboration: In this era of ever-tightening budgets, public universities that receive state educational resources are feeling the pressure to be more accountable to the communities they serve (*Smith 1996; Harkavy 1996; Todd, Ebata, and Hughes 1998*). Critics, both internal and external, cite universities' inattention to teaching, overemphasis on seemingly irrelevant and costly research, and a failure to recognize and address the needs of the community they serve (*Grossman and Leroux 1996; Todd, Ebata, and Hughes 1998*) as reasons for the increased pressure on universities to become more accountable to their communities. Much of the research in which faculty are engaged hinges on personal interest and personal benefits with little or no consideration given to the needs of the state, the community, or the institution (*Smith 1996, 30*). To all appearances, higher education's commitment to community service had diminished.

To ameliorate this problem, Smith suggests that publicly supported colleges and universities must regain the public's trust by demonstrating a new commitment to outreach. Through outreach initiatives, university faculty have the opportunity to build an understanding of community needs (*Smith 1996, 26*). Conversely, the community groups can gain an understanding of the expertise of university faculty and staff and improve their information base (*Stoecker 2002*).

For community agencies, this renewed commitment to outreach by universities comes at a critical time when most agencies are more pressured than ever to deliver sustainable results with decreasing resources. Edwards and Foley (1997) cite restructuring in the workplace and the dismantling of the welfare state in the late twentieth century as causal effects that threaten the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. The result is a preponderance of families with multiple needs not amenable to the typical clinical solutions.

Consequently, human service agencies face multiple problems as they seek to meet the needs of their communities. Salaries of staff are usually modest, and working conditions are frequently stressful. Funding sources can be tenuous (*Goeke, Caldwell, and Rule 1995*, 95). This multifold dilemma indicates the need for greater collaborations among human service agencies and other experts (*Gronski and Pigg 2000*). Therefore, with agencies facing such overwhelming problems and shortage of resources, mutually beneficial collaborations between universities and human resource agencies can yield tremendous benefits for all (*Goeke, Caldwell, and Rule 1995*, 99). In fact, university-community collaborations may well be one of the most promising measures to deal with these societal problems (*Mattai 1998-99*, 88).

Paradigm shift: In areas of outreach and collaboration with community, the historic ivory tower isolationism of universities is shifting (*Harkavy 1996*; *Stoecker 2002*; *Erickson and Weinberg 1998*). Harkavy (1996, 8) sees “the movement of universities from . . . consciously attempting to be ‘a part from’ to becoming ‘a part of’ their local environment as a response to a growing chorus of voices calling for a more engaged, active, and connected university.” In the past two decades, colleges and universities across the country have begun to transform themselves from standoffish ivory tower islands to neighborly community citizens (*Stoecker 2002*).

As a means to address societal concerns, universities, especially those driven by land-grant missions, are broadening their scope of extension teaching and adult education in order to promote outreach activities that address community needs (*Erickson and Weinberg 1998*, 185). “There are attempts to ‘reconnect’ institutions with the general public through increased attention to outreach” (*Todd, Ebata, and Hughes 1998*, 231). Through outreach initiatives, faculty have the opportunity to build an understanding of community needs, while

community agencies gain exposure to the expertise represented in the universities (*Smith 1996*, 26). If done well, outreach and public service programs can become catalysts for change by linking community needs to faculty expertise. To that end, universities "are witnessing a blossoming of institution building around new approaches to research and community involvement" (*Ansley and Gaventa 1997*). At many universities new programs and centers have emerged in various settings.

Power of perceptions: As universities move toward greater collaboration with the communities that they serve, it is incumbent upon them to investigate and validate the prevailing perceptions of all the stakeholders with whom they collaborate. Since

people "tend to accept their perceptions consistent with their values and interest" (*Sherif 1948*, 44), Bash (1973) suggests that "an individual's perception (actual or distorted) of a situation influences his behavior" (7). Therefore, if community members perceive that there is no parity among the members of the collaboration, they will reject the partnership. There must be a mutual exchange of beliefs and interests. When individuals or groups arrive at the collaboration with a fixed

set of perceptions, they tend to accept only those situations that fit their (the perceiver's) beliefs, motives, and interests (*Allport 1954*). Since data and facts are selected, perceived, and understood according to the needs, emotions, desires, personality, and previously formed relationships of the perceiver, all stakeholders must be heard. Collaborations can grow only when they are based on mutual trust and respect for the others' values, perspectives, and experiences (*Dunlap and Alva 1999*).

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Traits of successful collaborations: According to Gronski and Pigg (2000), collaboration is defined as an interactive process among individuals and organizations with diverse expertise and

resources, joining together to devise and execute plans for common goals as well as to generate solutions for complex problems. Smith (2003) states that collaborations differ from other types of university-community relationships because they involve true shared decision making among the various stakeholders. Important components necessary for collaborative success include: shared concerns; good timing; strong stakeholder groups; involvement of high-level, visible leaders; development of respect and trust; and especially a prior involvement between the university and the agency (Smith 2003).

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“Successful collaborations will depend on the effective communication of the respective needs of the university and the larger community to one another.” Concurring, Sandmann and Baker-Clark (1997) cite ongoing communication as a critical factor in successful collaborations. They also state that continued equity in the commitment to the partnership, continuous attention, and recognition of the expertise of all stakeholders create a win-win situation for all.

Barriers to effective collaborations: Despite the obvious benefits of collaboration, there are also barriers that must be overcome when initiating collaborations between university and community partners (Goeke, Caldwell, and Rule 1995; Groark and McCall 1996; Ramsburg 1997). It is important to understand the process of collaboration whose very nature breeds inherent problems among the partners (Todd, Ebata, Hughes 1998, 231). Goeke, Caldwell, and Rule (1995) mention questions about turf, differences in professional language, and conflicts between hierarchical and egalitarian

Russell and Flynn (2000) suggest that an effective collaboration is sustainable, is viewed positively by all partners, generates positive outcomes in accordance with the goals of the collaborative entity, and creates a means of open and equal communication and decision making. Communication is also the key to successful collabora-

organizational styles as potential obstacles that well-thought-out collaborative models should address (95). With more specificity, Groark and McCall (1996) identified barriers, including: attitudes of the two parties about each other; stakeholders and the agency's primary purpose conflicting with the goal of the partners; regulations that agencies must comply with, such as legal and policy standards, regulations, licensing requirements, guidelines, directives, and best practices; scarcity of resources, including financial and personnel resources; unreasonable requests from researchers that are burdensome for service agency personnel; and the notion of the imperfect laboratory (i.e., the environment of the agency) where there is no guarantee of consistent application of any type of research treatment. Finally, Ramsburg (1997) cited turf protection and mistrust, decision making processes, limited resources, dropping out, reduced participation, limited representation, communication, and lack of leadership as specific challenges and barriers that may impede or prevent the success of collaborations.

Methodology

Participants: The larger population of this study included all the human services agencies in York County. A representative sample of twenty agencies was chosen to be part of the first wave of meetings.

Procedure: The Penn State York group used a mixed methodology of qualitative focus groups and quantitative survey results. Believing that the first step in developing a successful collaboration is a careful assessment of the needs of the agencies, the Penn State York group created a list of all the human service agencies in the York area. Twenty local agencies were invited to attend a focus group meeting. These twenty were selected based on their diverse nature of services. In the initial letter sent to human services agencies in York City and County, the Penn State York group explained its mission: "The mission of the partnership is to promote healthy children, youth and family outcomes through community and university collaborations that foster basic and applied research, program development, evaluation, and professional development." The intent of the letter was to convey the message that Penn State York was maintaining Penn State University's commitment as a partner in the advancement of the local community and that Penn State York members were interested in forging innovative collaborations with local human service agencies.

The purpose of the meeting was to actively listen to the needs and desires of the agency personnel. The format of the meeting included a general introduction outlining the reasons behind the formation of the Penn State York group. This was followed by a session of brainstorming to identify issues that concerned the attending agency personnel. Following this, focus groups facilitated by members of the Penn State York group discussed the needs and concerns of the agencies relative to the previous topics discussed. From this meeting, critical information about agency needs and frustrations surfaced, prompting the Penn State York group to develop a survey to be sent to all agencies.

Instrument: The Penn State York group developed an eleven-question survey. The goals of the survey were (1) to compile information about the local agencies and their services; (2) to identify areas of research interests and goals that would be the cornerstone of the collaborations; and (3) to identify barriers to collaboration as perceived by the community partners so that those could be addressed to the extent possible. The survey requested:

1. Demographic information
2. Information about programs and services provided by the agencies
3. Populations served by the agencies
4. Research interests/issues of agencies
5. Keys to building successful collaborations
6. Potential barriers in building collaborations with Penn State.

Surveys were sent to twenty agencies. Of these, twelve agencies responded and indicated that they wished to be involved.

Results

Barriers to successful collaborations at PSY: From the twelve respondents, the Penn State York group discovered the agencies' perceptions of potential barriers to successful collaborations with Penn State York. (See Table 1.) Some of the respondents provided more than one response; therefore, the total number of responses does not match the number of respondents. Of those who responded, four indicated that time was the main barrier to successful collaborations. Insufficient time given to projects; time for staff to be involved on both sides; time to write grants; and limited staff time were the specific comments from respondents.

Table 1: Barriers To Successful Collaborations

| BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS | NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS | RESPONDENTS' SPECIFIC COMMENTS |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Time for collaboration | 4 respondents | Insufficient time given to projects; time for staff to be involved on both sides; time to write grants; limited staff time |
| Distance to PSY | 3 respondents | Distance between locations; distance between Hanover and PSY; physical distance |
| Limited funds | 2 respondents | Limited funds |
| Unclear/limited communications | 2 respondents | Lack of knowledge of what research resources are available; not being clear about the intent of the collaboration |
| No response | 2 No response | |

Keys to successful collaborations at PSY: Survey respondents were also asked to list keys to building successful collaborations. For this section of the survey, all twelve respondents provided answers; some of them provided multiple answers. The two most often-mentioned keys to successful collaborations were communication and mutual interest/benefit. Quotes from respondents indicated the following keys to building successful collaborations:

1. Keep doing what we are doing; support each other's efforts
2. Quality technical assistance at a graduate research level; consistent. Reliable personnel; timely completion of projects
3. Mutual interest in project

4. Communication and open-minded to new ideas; training teachers on education initiatives; applying for collaborating grants
5. Agreement in goals
6. Only interest on a part of Penn State and this meeting is a good start
7. Frank and open communication; serve mutual benefits (two-way street)
8. We do have some collaboration with Penn State cooperative extension; to have collaboration with the York campus, we need to know the programs that you have to offer
9. Clear understanding of roles; what the goals of the collaboration would be; open communication
10. Communication; appropriate referrals
11. Trainings PSY offers for only \$5, Mutual interest, need, and benefit.

Conclusions/Implications

Conclusions: Even though the sample of this study was small (twelve respondents), the concerns of the York area agencies match the concerns voiced by agencies in much larger studies. University-community partnership had an ambivalent connotation for many agency personnel. In informal conversations, agency personnel candidly commented that university research typically was “someone coming in and telling the agency what they (the university researchers) wanted to do.” Through the small-group discussions, the Penn State York group discovered that agency personnel felt that they were never “equal” to the university partners. Another revelation was that agencies needed the research capabilities of the Penn State York group as much as the Penn State York group faculty needed research opportunities. Much mutual ground was established when the agencies were apprised of the areas of expertise of Penn State York group members.

By listening to the agencies in the small groups and by carefully assessing the responses to the survey, the Penn State York group was able to include agency personnel feedback in the initial formation of the partnership. The group name, CUP (Community University Partnership), was deliberately created to address the community first. While the truly radical potential of collaborations is their ability to create social change by improving participation (Stoecker 2002), this potential will never be realized if the collab-

oration fails to recognize and honor the perspectives of all partners. If all perspectives are heard, collaborations can create a win-win situation for all involved (*Ramsburg 1997*). The CUP group believes that by listening to the voices of the participating agencies, they have forged a win-win partnership between Penn State York and the greater York community.

Implications: For universities seeking to establish collaborations with community agencies, the implications are clear.

1. First, collaborative efforts that are sustainable take time and considerable patience to develop. Liontos (*1991*) suggests that it often takes one to five years to make collaboration projects viable, and potential pitfalls abound in any university agency partnership.
2. Second, to build the kind of trusting relationships that ensure win-win outcomes, sufficient time and energy must be devoted to establishing mutual trust. All stakeholders need to be involved in the initial phase of a partnership (*Sandmann and Baker-Clark 1997*). In addition, the realities about differing organizational styles must be acknowledged and accommodated (*Goeke, Caldwell, and Rule 1995*).
3. Third, a critical implication is the need for two-way, open communication in a language all partners can understand.
4. Finally, all members of the collaboration must have a clear understanding of the roles of all stakeholders in the partnership, as well as an understanding of the resources and limitations that the partners bring to the table.

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